



Home

Contributor
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Consultation on proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum

Respondent's details

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Is this response a personal view or is it made on behalf of an organisation?

Personal

Organisation

Do you consent to the submission being published online at the end of the consultation?

Yes

No

Written submissions may be in English or Irish.

Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum can be found [here](#).

Please email your submissions to structureandtime@ncca.ie

1. The first set of proposals in the Consultation Paper recommends moving from a model comprising four two-year stages to an incremental model of either three stages or two stages.

Please consider:

- The extent to which you agree / disagree with this proposed change to a **three-/two-stage model**
- The benefits / challenges of the **two-stage model**
- The benefits / challenges of the **three-stage model**
- **Your preferred model and reasons** for this preference.

I agree, in principle, with the proposed change to a staged curriculum model. I favour the three-stage model; I see it as supporting progression from early years' settings to primary schools and from primary schools to secondary schools. I also see it as supporting incremental progression within the primary school itself; enabling children, as they mature, to progress from the exploration of broadly based themes (stage one) to curriculum areas (stage two) to a more focussed exploration of subjects in greater depth (stage three).

The Consultation Paper identifies concerns about teachers' abilities to teach through the medium of play in the early years. This is a concern which will need to be addressed with regard to either of the proposed models; more difficult, however, to address with regard to a two-stage model. It will not be enough to provide some initial training (on the introduction of the curriculum) to teachers; teachers will need access to sustained (and, at times, intensive) support if they are to be persuaded to move from more tried and tested approaches to the play-based approaches advocated in the first stage of the three-stage model. (They will also need access to ongoing support in relation to the move from subjects to curriculum areas in the second stage of that model). Furthermore, a 'child led' approach to play/learning will require a reduction in class size at infant level. It is unrealistic to expect teachers with large numbers of small children in their classes to adopt an approach that is entirely, or even predominantly, 'child led'.

While teachers have identified curriculum overload as one of the barriers to implementing the 1999 curriculum, teachers' own lack of confidence and expertise in areas such as science, PE, and the arts have also been barriers to successful implementation. These latter barriers might have been addressed with the provision of sustained specialist expertise and support in these areas (I'm not advocating for specialist teachers but for a sustained support structure led by teachers with specialist expertise and with far greater capacity and reach than the current system of support provided by PDST). It is imperative that curriculum change be supported not just in the initial stages on a one-off or sporadic basis but on a sustained basis over the longer term. Indeed, the key to successful curriculum change lies in the provision of extensive and sustained support for schools and teachers at local level. Without a commitment to the provision of such support, any proposed changes will have limited impact. This is borne out in relation to the 1999 curriculum: in the widespread non-implementation of the drama curriculum (though the drama curriculum itself with its focus on exploring feelings, knowledge and ideas may be a contributing factor here), in the lack of priority given to science in many schools and in the non-implementation of some of the strands of the PE curriculum. (This list is not intended to be exhaustive!). It is interesting to note, however, that these particular subjects/curriculum strands (e.g. dance) have been identified as ones in which teachers also lack confidence and/or expertise.

I am broadly in agreement with the benefits and challenges of the three-stage model as outlined in the Consultation Paper. I am particularly concerned about the issues identified in relation to career

progression and these need to be carefully addressed to ensure that all teachers have equal access to progression. Within both models too, there are challenges for initial teacher education. Over the years, lecturers in initial teacher education have become increasingly specialised. This has led to the prevailing differentiated (subject) approach to curriculum in ITE. This approach needs to be reassessed, and reformulated, in light of the more integrated approach to curriculum proposed in the Consultation Paper. However, this reassessment/reformulation should not occur at the expense of ITE's crucial role in enabling students to critique and interrogate curriculum and the broader social, cultural and historical contexts in which it is located. It is imperative that this latter role is not subordinated to that of enabling students to become effective curriculum mediators. Closer co-operation between ITE and schools, particularly in the area of school placement, could enable such tensions to be negotiated. Greater involvement of practising teachers in ITE (on a part-time or short-term secondment basis) could also enable students to develop a greater understanding of curriculum as 'lived', while simultaneously opening (more) spaces for both students and teachers to interrogate and critique it.

The Consultation Paper makes the point that 'purposeful teaching and learning occurs when teachers' subject knowledge contributes to appropriate pedagogical strategies and meaningful learning experiences for children'. It thus underlines the importance to children's learning of teachers' subject knowledge. It is interesting to note that the subjects currently constituted as core (English, Irish and Maths) are those subjects in which teachers have served a long apprenticeship as primary and secondary school students themselves; subjects in which it could thus be expected that they have confidence and expertise. These are also the subjects on which teachers spend (and are exhorted to spend) most time in schools. If other subjects (such as those identified above) are to be valued and taught effectively, the issue of teacher confidence and expertise needs to be prioritised. I have suggested (above) that this might be achieved through the provision of a sustained system of local support, which (as I argue above) requires the sourcing, education and ongoing deployment of support teachers with particular subject expertise. In addition, the issue of teacher confidence and expertise in all curriculum subjects needs to be accorded priority in ITE and/or early professional development. The effective teaching of curriculum areas in the proposed second stage of the three-stage model demands that teachers possess the breadth and depth of subject knowledge required to develop 'pedagogical strategies and meaningful learning experiences for children.' Without this knowledge, the potential offered by a truly integrated curriculum to enhance children's learning will remain underdeveloped. There is perhaps an argument here for reconstituting current BEd programmes as double honours programmes; to include education and another subject (the latter predicated, in very broad terms, on the primary school curriculum. For example, English might include modules on children's literature as well as modules on twentieth century literature etc.). Furthermore, postgraduate entry to ITE might be limited to those with undergraduate degrees in specific subjects.

The Consultation Paper outlines an incremental shift in both models from 'child led' to 'teacher led' learning. I think these terms need further unpacking/clarification. For, as also noted in the Consultation Paper, if young children are to acquire knowledge that will take them beyond their existing experiences, it is incumbent on the teacher – albeit cognisant of young children's existing knowledge, experience, interests and curiosity – to lead the children to new understandings. While the Consultation paper clarifies (in small print) that teacher-led is 'not synonymous with a transmission model of teaching and learning' (p.15), the need for the maturing child to take increased responsibility for what and how s/he learns needs to be underlined. Surely, the teacher's primary role should be – by the third stage of the three-stage model – to facilitate children to be both independent and collaborative learners, as well as to provide direct instruction in specific subject domains as appropriate and as demanded by curriculum.

2. The second set of proposals in the Consultation Paper recommends a new model of time allocation for primary schools.

Please consider:

- The extent to which you agree / disagree with the proposals on **minimum state curriculum time**
- The extent to which you agree / disagree with the proposals on **flexible time**
- The idea of **specifying time allocations** for themes/curriculum areas/subjects
- Your views on whether time should be allocated on a **weekly, monthly termly, annual basis**.

I am broadly in agreement with the idea that there should be a minimum state curriculum time of 60% and flexible time of 40%. I am, moreover, in favour of weekly minimum time allocations for English and Maths. However, I think it may be time – given the ever-declining standard of the Irish language among teachers (there are, of course, many exceptions) – to consider removing Irish as a core subject from the curriculum; the implications for the new language curriculum notwithstanding. The Irish language, as a non-core subject, might be located within a learning domain such as ‘culture, heritage and the arts’. (Schools could also have the opportunity to retain the Irish language as core, if they wished.) The removal of Irish as a core subject would go some way towards addressing the question posed in the Consultation Paper: *what should come out?* I will, however, leave it to others, more expert than I am, to debate the merits and demerits attached to including a second language in the curriculum.

I would suggest that – given Ireland’s rising levels of obesity and the concomitant health implications – PE should be included as a core subject on the curriculum. The resultant increase in time for PE would enable children to develop habits of physical activity from an early age. It would also enable them to develop a broad range of physical skills; facilitating them to participate in, and choose from, an array of physical activities. PE, however, is one of the subjects in which many teachers lack confidence and expertise. These are issues that would need to be addressed as a matter of priority if PE was to be afforded core curriculum status (see previous section). I note, with some concern, what appears to me to be a move to include PE within the broader learning domain of ‘well-being’. I fear that such a move could lead to a reduction, rather than an increase, in the importance attributed to (and time spent on) physical activity in schools.

As suggested in the Consultation Paper, I think it would be useful to state the minimum curriculum time for core subjects (to include PE) on a weekly basis so as to ensure ‘frequent teaching of these subjects’ (p.44). It might, however, be more useful to specify minimum time allocations for other themes/curriculum areas/subjects on a termly basis. Specifying them on a monthly basis (as proposed in the Consultation Paper) could prove restrictive for schools and teachers, some of whom may find ‘planning in blocks of time over an extended period’ (DES, 1999) to be the most effective and efficient way of mediating the curriculum. In addition – as stated in the Consultation Paper – I see the incorporation of ‘flexible time into the curriculum ... [as going] some way to responding the call to support teacher professional judgement and provide flexibility for schools in how they negotiate the curriculum at local level’ (pp.45-46).

The proposed inclusion of coding on the curriculum raises two important issues: 1) the lack of sufficient empirical research to support its inclusion 2) teachers’ (there are exceptions) lack of expertise in relation to same. This lack of expertise also raises the issue of the financial outlay necessary to provide teachers with the skills (and supports) required to teach coding effectively. For, as we have learnt from the implementation of the 1999 curriculum, the inclusion of

subjects/curriculum strands on the curriculum does not mean that they will be taught. Or, as it is put in the Consultation Paper, the '*intended* allocation of time' and the '*actual* use of time' (p.39) do not necessarily converge. In addition, I think it is important to acknowledge here that – as stated in the Consultation Paper – 'while guidance on time allocation may be significant for teachers and schools, inevitably it is the learning experiences provided for children that contribute most significantly to a child's development' (p.41).

3. Reflecting in general on the proposals for a new primary curriculum structure and for rethinking how time is used within the curriculum, are there any further comments or reflections that you would like to share?

I note in figure 8, Curriculum areas in other jurisdictions (p.45), in only 3 – Ireland, Northern Ireland and Canada – of the 10 jurisdictions referred to, is drama named as a component of arts education. However, as I have outlined above, the inclusion of drama on the curriculum has not necessarily meant that it has been taught in schools. So when it comes to the issue of what to leave out of any new curriculum, drama is often mentioned. I would argue, however, that drama should be retained within the broader curriculum area of 'arts, heritage and cultural education' in stage two and as a subject *option* in stage 3. The single strand of the 1999 drama curriculum, 'drama to explore knowledge, feelings and ideas leading to understanding', identifies drama as a learning medium rather than as an art form. As an art form, drama, like creative writing, is concerned with shaping and sharing stories. The tools used to shape stories in drama include bodies, space, sounds (including music and words) and objects. Since drama requires content, it makes sense that drama's content should come from other curricular areas, thereby enabling children to deepen their understanding of those areas. However, I would argue that children's learning in these other areas should not be at the expense of their learning in drama. Drama, like music, visual art, dance, film and the language arts, is primarily an art form; it is not just a teaching methodology (though it can be used as one as well). The issue of drama's lack of alignment, in the current curriculum, with the other arts areas needs to be addressed in any new curriculum. The focus needs to shift from drama for understanding (though understanding may occur) to the processes of creating, performing and appreciating/responding to drama as per the curriculum in the other arts areas: visual arts (making and looking and responding), music (composing, performing, listening and responding) and dance (exploring, creating, performing, understanding and appreciating) (DES, 1999). A similar process-based approach to poetry (reading, writing and responding) and film (making and looking and responding), as named components of a new arts education curriculum, could also be included. The equivalent of the current 3 hour allocation per week for arts education might be maintained (though on a termly basis) and schools could decide on the arts areas they wish to, or have the expertise to, prioritise in any given term (or part thereof). The issue of a sustained support structure led by teachers with specialist expertise in the arts is particularly pertinent here. And, in order to ensure that the required arts expertise exists in schools into the future, student teachers could be required to take at least 'one intensive elective' (Benson, 1979) in an arts area. In the current modular system operating in initial teacher education, 'one intensive elective' might be constituted as a 6 or 9 credit module. In addition, colleges, as per the Benson report (1979), might 'investigate the possibility of developing some integrated arts courses rather than maintaining strict distinctions between the arts subjects' (Benson, 1979, p.145). They might also – as recommended in the Benson report – develop more postgraduate and CPD opportunities in the arts. Incentives may, however, need to be provided to ensure that teachers avail of these opportunities. (Many of the suggestions made here in relation to the arts could also be applied to PE, science and technology.)

In the 1999 curriculum, dance is acknowledged as an art form. It is, nevertheless, located within the PE curriculum. Indeed, Canada is the only country, of the 10 referred to in the Consultation Paper, in which dance is named as a component of the arts education curriculum. However, the 'dance as art' model (after Brinson, 1991 and Smith-Autard, 1994), on which the dance strand of Ireland's current PE curriculum is based, places dance firmly within the context of arts education. Consistent with the 'dance as art' model, the dance strand focusses on engaging children in the processes of creating, performing and responding to/appreciating dance. When children engage in these processes (in dance and in the other arts) with reference to broader artistic, aesthetic and cultural practices and traditions, their cultural education is enhanced. So, as Brinson (1991) writes, 'dance contributes to the physical education of pupils, but to define it solely in these terms is to severely limit its potential in education' (p. 165). Crucial to the realisation of this potential is the already much touted issue of teacher confidence and expertise. Dance's location in any new curriculum (within arts education or within PE or even straddling both) is of secondary importance.

References

Benson, C. (1979) *The Place of the Arts in Irish Education*. Dublin: The Arts Council of Ireland. (This report is more commonly known as the Benson Report.)

Brinson, P. (1991) *Dance as Education: Towards a National Dance Culture*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

DES (1999) *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction, Physical Education, Drama, Music, Visual Arts*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Smith-Autard, J. (2013) *The Art of Dance in Education 2nd ed*. London: Bloomsbury (2002, 1994).